



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**ASSESSMENT OF IRON STATUS AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN THE
FISHING VILLAGES OF TUARAN, SABAH**

FOO LENG HUAT

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By

FOO LENG HUAT

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Science**

April 2002



DEDICATED TO

**My family members, especially my grandmother
Mdm. Beh Cheng Goh and loved one, Khor Lee Hua,**

For their constant support and unceasing encouragement that has sustained me
towards the completion of this thesis

**Subjects, subject's parents and friends who were directly or
indirectly involved in this project**

For their constant support, co-operation and commitment throughout the study

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Chairman : Professor Dr. Khor Geok Lin

Faculty : Medicine and Health Sciences

Iron deficiency anaemia is the most common micronutrient deficiency in the world affecting the general health of millions. In Malaysia, a moderately high prevalence of anemia is often reported in infants, young children and women of childbearing age. Data on anaemia is scant for the adolescents. This study was undertaken to assess the iron status of adolescents from six fishing villages in Tuaran, Sabah. A total of 199 subjects comprising 94 male and 105 female were included in the study. Their ages ranged from 12 to 19 years with a mean of 15.2 years. Multiple iron status indicators namely, serum ferritin (SF), transferrin saturation (TS), mean corpuscular volume (MCV) and hemoglobin concentration were used to estimate the stages of iron deficiency. The majority of the male (68.1%) and female subjects (82.9%) had normal body mass index (BMI) values, while 25.5% and 14.3% of the males and females respectively were underweight. A small percentage of the adolescents was overweight, that is 6.4% and 2.9% of the male and female respectively. Male adolescents showed significantly higher mean values for hemoglobin concentration, hematocrit, red blood count, serum iron, transferrin

saturation and serum ferritin than the female subjects. In contrast, female adolescents had a significantly higher level of total iron binding capacity. The prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia, iron deficiency and iron depletion among the adolescents (both sexes) were 17%, 23% and 6% respectively. Approximately 85% of the anaemia prevalence could be attributed to iron deficiency. The prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia was higher among the females (26%) than the male adolescents (5%). Food intake data showed that the male adolescents had significantly higher intakes of energy, carbohydrates, protein, fat, vitamin C, thiamin, riboflavin and niacin than the female subjects. Nonetheless, intake of all nutrients except for protein, niacin and vitamin C by both sexes were below the recommended dietary allowances levels for Malaysia. The dietary iron intake among the adolescents was unsatisfactory with about 98% failing to meet the recommended levels. Majority of the adolescents derived dietary iron mainly from plant foods (78%), that is, only about 22% of the total iron intake was from animal products. A significant correlation was shown between hemoglobin concentrations and body weight, and a negative correlation with age indicating that hemoglobin concentrations tend to increase with body weight and decrease with age. Dietary nutrient intake except for carbohydrates showed significant correlations with serum ferritin, serum iron, transferrin saturation, mean corpuscular volume and hemoglobin. In contrast, total iron binding capacity (TIBC) was negatively correlated with all the nutrients. These results indicated the importance of dietary iron intake in improving the iron stores among the adolescents. Based on the World Health Organization criteria (WHO, 1996), the prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia in the present study population (18%), especially the female adolescents (26%), appears to be a significant public health problem with regards to iron deficiency. It is hoped that with the results of this study, iron deficiency in

adolescents from low-income groups, especially the female adolescents would be accorded greater attention. Nutrition education and other intervention programs including micronutrient supplementation and dietary diversification are recommended for the alleviation of iron deficiency in adolescence.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**PENILAIAN STATUS FERUM DI KALANGAN REMAJA DI
PERKAMPUNGAN NELAYAN TUARAN, SABAH**

Oleh
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Anemia kekurangan ferum merupakan kekurangan mikronutrient yang paling tersebar luas di dunia ini dimana mengakibatkan beramai-ramai kemudaratan kesihatan. Di Malaysia, prevalen anemia yang sederhana tinggi kerap dilaporkan di kalangan bayi, kanak-kanak dan wanita dalam lingkungan umur boleh mengandung. Data bagi anemia adalah kurang bagi golongan remaja. Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menilai status ferum di kalangan remaja daripada enam perkampungan nelayan di Tuaran, Sabah.. Seramai 199 subjek remaja yang terdiri daripada 94 lelaki and 105 perempuan telah menyertai kajian ini. Lingkungan umur mereka adalah daripada 12 hingga 19 tahun. Pelbagai indikator status ferum seperti serum ferritin, kepekatan transferrin, min isipadu corpuscular and kepekatan hemoglobin digunakan bagi menganggar peringkat kekurangan ferum. Majoriti remaja lelaki (68.1%) dan perempuan (82.9%) mempunyai nilai indek jism badan yang normal, sementara 25.5% dan 14.3% remaja lelaki and perempuan masing-masing mengalami kekurangan berat badan. Terdapat peratusan kecil remaja mengalami berlebihan berat badan, iaitu 6.4% dan 2.9% bagi lelaki dan perempuan masing-masing. Remaja

lelaki menunjukkan nilai min yang tinggi secara signifikan bagi kepekatan hemoglobin, hematokrit, kiraan darah merah, serum ferum, kepekatan transferrin, dan serum ferritin berbanding dengan subjek perempuan. Sebaliknya, remaja perempuan mempunyai tahap keupayaan ikatan keseluruhan ferum yang tinggi secara signifikan. Prevalen anemia kekurangan ferum, kekurangan ferum dan kehabisan ferum di kalangan remaja (kedua-dua jantina) ialah 17%, 23% dan 6%. Kira-kira 85% daripada kejadian anemia adalah atribut kepada kekurangan ferum. Kejadian anemia kekurangan ferum adalah tinggi di kalangan remaja perempuan (26%) berbanding dengan remaja lelaki (5%). Data pengambilan makanan menunjukkan remaja lelaki mempunyai pengambilan tenaga, karbohidrat, protein, lemak, vitamin C, thiamin, riboflavin and niasin yang tinggi secara signifikan berbanding dengan subjek perempuan. Namun demikian, pengambilan keseluruhan nutrien kecuali protein, niasin dan vitamin C bagi kedua-dua jantina adalah di bawah tahap cadangan peruntukkan dietari bagi Malaysia. Pengambilan dietari ferum di kalangan remaja adalah paling tidak memuaskan dimana sekitar 98% gagal memenuhi tahap cadangan keizinan dietari. Kebanyakan remaja memperoleh dietari ferum terutamanya daripada makanan berunsurkan tumbuhan (78%), iaitu hanya kira-kira 22% daripada pengambilan ferum keseluruhan berasal daripada makanan berunsurkan haiwan. Korelasi signifikan yang ditunjukkan di antara kepekatan hemoglobin dan berat badan, dan korelasi negatif dengan umur memperlihatkan bahawa kepekatan hemoglobin cenderung meningkat dengan berat badan dan menurun dengan umur. Pengambilan nutrien dietari kecuali karbohidrat menunjukkan korelasi yang signifikan dengan serum ferritin, serum ferum, kepekatan transferrin, min isipadu cospuscular dan hemoglobin. Sebaliknya, keupayaan ikatan keseluruhan ferum adalah berkorelasi negatif dengan keseluruhan

nutrien. Keputusan ini menunjukkan bahawa kepentingan pengambilan ferum dietari dapat meningkatkan penyimpanan ferum di kalangan remaja. Berdasarkan kriteria Pertubuhan Kesihatan Sedunia (WHO, 1996), prevalen anemia kekurangan ferum di kalangan populasi kajian (18%), terutamanya remaja perempuan (26%), ternyata merupakan masalah kesihatan awam signifikan yang berhubung dengan kekurangan ferum. Diharapkan dengan keputusan kajian ini, kekurangan ferum di kalangan remaja daripada golongan pendapatan rendah, terutamanya remaja perempuan dapat diberikan perhatian yang lebih menyeluruh. Pendidikan pemakanan dan program intervensi yang lain termasuk suplementasi mikronutrien dan pengubahsuaian dietari dicadangkan bagi pengurangan kekurangan ferum di peringkat remaja.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 11th April 2002 to conduct the final examination of Foo Leng Huat on his Master of Science thesis entitled “Assessment of Iron Status among Adolescents in the Fishing Villages of Tuaran, Sabah” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.


FOO LENG HUAT

Date: 23 MAY 2002

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ABSTRAK	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
APPROVAL SHEETS	xi
DECLARATION FORM	xiii
LIST OF TABLES	xvii
LIST OF FIGURES	xix
 CHAPTER	
 ONE INTRODUCTION	 1
Problem of Anaemia Worldwide	1
Anaemia in Malaysia- Nature and Dimensions	2
Anaemia in Sabah	5
Problem Statement	5
Rationale for this Study in Sabah	9
Objectives	10
Main Objective	10
Specific Objectives	10
Hypotheses	11
Variables and Indicators	12
Conceptual Framework of the Study	15
Operational Definition	17
 TWO LITERATURE REVIEW	 18
Introduction	18
Iron Absorption	19
Intestinal Mucosal Uptake	19
Absorption From Foods	20
Heme Iron	21
Non-heme Iron	22
Enhancers of Iron Absorption	23
Meat	23
Ascorbic Acid	24
Inhibitors of Iron Absorption	25
Phytates	25
Polyphenols Compounds	26
Tannates of Tea	27
Coffee	28
Interactions between Iron and Other Nutrients	29
Zinc	29
Calcium	30
Vitamin A	31
Iron Deficiency and Iron Deficiency Anaemia Specific Conditions	33



Physical Activity.....	33
Vegetarianism.....	35
Menarche Status.....	36
Functional and Health Implications of IDA.....	36
Work Capacity and Productivity.....	36
Brain and Mental Development.....	38
Immunity Responses.....	40
Assessment of Iron Status.....	41
Serum Ferritin.....	43
Transferrin Saturation.....	44
Free Erythrocyte Protoporphyrin.....	45
Hemoglobin.....	46
THREE METHODOLOGY.....	48
Study Location and Subjects.....	48
Sabah State.....	48
The Bajau.....	48
Selection of Study Villages.....	49
Selection of Subjects.....	49
Exclusion Criteria.....	50
Data Collection.....	52
Socioeconomic Background and Lifestyles.....	52
Dietary Assessment.....	53
24-hours Dietary Recall.....	53
Semi-quantitative Food Frequency Questionnaire.....	55
Anthropometric Measurements.....	55
Body Weight.....	56
Height.....	56
Blood Collection.....	57
Haematological Determinations.....	57
Biochemical Determinations.....	58
Classification of Iron Status.....	59
Blood Malaria Parasite Test.....	63
Data Analysis.....	64
Biochemical and Haematological Analysis.....	65
Nutrient Intake Analysis.....	66
Anthropometric Analysis-Percentiles of BMI-for-Age.....	67
FOUR RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS.....	68
Socio-demographic Characteristic of Subjects.....	68
Socio-demographic and Economic Profile of Household.....	70
Socio-economic Profile of Household.....	72
Nutritional Status of the Adolescents.....	73
Nutrition Status of Adolescents - WHO Reference.....	75
Menarche Status.....	78
Comparison of Age at Menarche in Various Populations.....	79
Biochemical and Haematological Parameters.....	80
Iron Status Classification according to Gender and Age Groups.....	83
Comparison between Iron Status Classification and	

	Haematological and Biochemical Indicators.....	86
	Iron Status Indicators according to Menstrual Cycle Phase..	87
	Correlation between the Haematological Indices.....	94
	Correlation between Age and Anthropometric Parameters with Iron Status Indices.....	97
	Dietary Intakes.....	97
	Percentage of Energy Derived from Carbohydrates, Protein and Fat.....	101
	Intake of Energy and Nutrient according to Gender and Age Groups.....	103
	Energy and Selected Nutrient Intake Relative to the RDA of Malaysia.....	107
	Correlation between Dietary Intake and Haematological and Biochemical Indicators.....	116
	Food Frequency Score.....	119
	Knowledge on Anaemia.....	122
FIVE	CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	130
	Conclusion.....	130
	Recommendations.....	134
	Strategies for Prevention of IDA.....	134
	Health Screening Programmes	134
	Iron Supplementation.....	135
	Nutrition and Health Education.....	136
	Community Participation.....	137
	Recommendations for Future Studies.....	137
	REFERENCES	139
	APPENDICES	160
	BIODATA OF THE AUTHOR.....	194

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 Prevalence of anaemia amongst children of various ethnic groups in the Interior, West Coast and Kudat Division of Sabah	6
2 Variables and indicators of the study	13
3 Dietary and host-related factors that influence iron absorption	23
4 Iron status was determined from a four variable model of iron status (serum ferritin, transferrin saturation, hemoglobin and mean corpuscular volume)	61
5 Cut-off point of deficient values used for biochemical and haematological indicators	62
6 Criteria for the iron status classification of the adolescents	63
7 Classification of percentile BMI-for-age	67
8 Socio-demographic profile of subjects by gender (n=199)	69
9 Socio-demographic profile of households in study sample (n=148)	71
10 Socio-economic characteristics of subjects' households (n=148)	74
11 Anthropometric parameters of the male and female adolescents (n=199)	76
12 Age at menarche in selected population of various countries	79
13 Biochemical and haematological parameters of the male and female adolescents (n=165)	82
14 Classification of iron status among the male and female adolescents (n=165)	85
15 Comparison of iron status classification with haematological and biochemical indicators by male adolescents (n=74)	90
16 Comparison of iron status classification with haematological and biochemical indicators by female adolescents (n=91)	92
17 Iron status indicators measures according to the menstrual cycle phases (n= 91)	95



Table		Page
18	Correlation coefficients between the haematological indices (n=165)	96
19	Correlation coefficients between iron status indicators and anthropometric parameters of male adolescents (n=74)	98
20	Correlation coefficients between iron status indicators and anthropometric parameters of female adolescents (n=91)	99
21	Mean daily intake of energy and nutrient of male and female adolescents (n=199)	102
22	Mean daily intake of energy and nutrient of male adolescents according to age groups (n=94)	105
23	Mean daily intake of energy and nutrient of female adolescents according to age groups (n=105)	106
24	Percentage of adolescents (sexes combined) with nutrient intake at various levels of adequacy (n=199)	112
25	Percentage of male adolescents with nutrient intake at various levels of adequacy (n=94)	113
26	Percentage of female adolescents with nutrient intake at various levels of adequacy (n=105)	114
27	Iron content in food groups consumed by the male and female subjects	115
28	Correlation coefficients between energy and nutrients intake and haematological and biochemical Indicator (n=165)	118
29	Food frequency score among adolescents by gender	123
30	Preference of topics for anaemia intervention programs (n=199)	129

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem of Anaemia Worldwide

Undernutrition is the most important nutritional problem involving both protein energy malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies worldwide (Darnton-Hill *et al.*, 1996). Nutritional anaemia, vitamin A deficiency and iodine deficiency disorders are the major micronutrient deficiencies in many countries (Darnton-Hill *et al.*, 1992). Nutritional anaemia is commonly associated with deficiencies of iron, folate and vitamin B₁₂. Among these, iron deficiency is most frequently encountered and it can be characterised by low hemoglobin and mean corpuscular (MCV)-microcytic hypochromia, decreased levels of transferrin saturation and serum ferritin.

Iron deficiency is a major nutritional deficiency in both industrialized countries (Arija *et al.*, 1990) and developing countries (Tee *et al.*, 1999; Thu *et al.*, 1999; Husaini *et al.*, 1991; Prual *et al.*, 1992; Cornet *et al.*, 1998). The prevalence of anaemia in developing countries is three to four times higher than that in industrialized countries. More than 3.5 billion people in the developing countries are estimated to suffer from anaemia (UNICEF/UNU/WHO/MI, 1999). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated the prevalence of iron deficiency worldwide is high, affecting the general health and wellbeing of 2000 million people (Underwood, 1999). Pregnant women, children aged 5 to 14 years children and pre-school children are high-risk groups (ACC/SCN, 2000). In some developing

countries such as Argentina, Tanzania, Cameron and Zanzibar, more than 50% of infant, young children and pregnant women are anaemic with hemoglobin level below 110g/l (Calvo and Grazzo, 1990; Tatala *et al.*, 1998; Cornet *et al.*, 1998; Stolfus *et al.*, 2000; Dugdale, 1994). Women lose storage iron during menstruation and pregnancy when iron is transported for the development of the foetus. Poor quality diet and lack of iron supplementation during pregnancy are contributing factors of iron deficiency in women.

Serious consequences of anaemia include impaired cognitive and optimal behaviour (Bruner *et al.*, 1996; Nelson, 1996), reduced immune functions leading to increased risk of morbidity and mortality (Darnton-Hill *et al.*, 1996). Anaemia also has deleterious effects on school academic performance (Pollitt, 1997; Pollitt *et al.*, 1989), general health and wellbeing, reproductive performance (Darnton-Hill *et al.*, 1996), physical performance (Nelson, 1996; Zhu and Haas, 1997) and work capacity (Li *et al.*, 1994; Pourghassem *et al.*, 2000). These consequences have serious impact on the health, economic and social development of individuals and the country as a whole.

Anaemia in Malaysia- Nature and Dimensions

The overall nutrition situation in Malaysia has greatly improved over the years (Tee and Cavalli-Sforza, 1993). However, pockets of malnutrition still exists in various parts of Malaysia. Several studies undertaken in the 1990s showed that certain “old” nutrition problems persist. These include protein-energy malnutrition in the forms of underweight, stunting and wasting, as well as iron deficiency anaemia, worm infestation and iodine deficiency disorders (Khor, 1997).

Iron deficiency anaemia is one of the most important micronutrient deficiencies in the country for the past several decades (Tee, 1999a). Infancy is highly susceptible to iron deficiency due to rapid growth and inadequate nutritional intake. A study undertaken by Tee and her workers (1994) showed that 16% apparently healthy infants aged 6 to 24 months were anaemic in the Child Health Clinic in University Hospital, Kuala Lumpur (Hb < 11g/dl). Iron deficiency anaemia was the most common problem (35%) among these anaemic children, followed by thalassaemia traits (26.9%). Increased risk of iron deficiency during infancy might be due to inadequate intake of complementary food and exclusive breast-feeding for more than six months (Mills, 1990; Oski, 1993; Booth and Aukett, 1997).

Documentation of iron deficiency anaemia amongst Malaysian children began in the 1940s and it remains a common nutrition problem of childhood. In an early nutrition survey, the prevalence of anaemia (Hb <70% of Tallqvist scale) was found high, ranging from 42 to 90% among the 1,200 children from welfare centers, orphanages and a refugee camp (Boume, 1949). Studies in the 1970s indicated that the prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia among pre-school children and young children were 23% and 18.6% respectively (Chong, 1974; Kandiah and Lim, 1976). A study in the early 1990s reported the prevalence of anaemia (Hb <11g/dl) in young children aged less than 7 years ranged from 12% to 56% in rural villagers and estates in Peninsular Malaysia (Tee *et al.*, 1998). These studies highlighted the persistence of the anaemia problem among Malaysian children in the past decades.

During pregnancy, iron requirements exceed storage iron for most women due to increases in the red cell mass, iron needs of the foetus and iron losses during delivery (Bothwell *et al.*, 1984). Inadequate iron supply can restrict the expansion of red cell mass and lead to further deterioration in iron status during pregnancy which

may increase risks for the pregnant women and her infant (Allen, 1997). Moderate to severe anaemia during pregnancy is associated with an increased risk of low birth weight and preterm delivery (Scholl *et al.*, 1992; Scholl and Reilly, 2000; Zhou *et al.*, 1998). Incidence of anaemia among pregnant women in Malaysia was high in early studies (Tasker *et al.*, 1956ab, 1958). Anaemia was considered to be one of the main complications of pregnancy (Tasker, 1956b and 1958). A study in the 1980s among pregnant women showed a progressive fall in haematological indicators with the progression of pregnancy from first to third trimester (George *et al.*, 1980). A study carried out by Tee and co-workers (1984) at the Maternity Hospital, Kuala Lumpur showed a high prevalence of anaemia (Hb < 11g/dL) ranging from 30 to 60% among 309 pregnant women. A study on menstruating women indicated that more than half of them were anaemic (Hb < 12g/dl), while 26.6% were iron-deficient (serum ferritin < 12µg/dl) (Goh and Hariharan, 1985). These studies also found that Chinese women had higher mean hemoglobin and serum ferritin levels than the Malays and Indians (Goh *et al.*, 1985; Tee *et al.*, 1984).

Data on nutritional anaemia among Malaysian adolescents are scarce as compared to other age groups such as pre-school children, pregnant and lactating women. A study on female adolescents aged 12 to 17 years in Sarawak reported prevalence of anaemia ranging from 9% to 37 % (Tee *et al.*, 1996). The survey conducted in rural villages and estates in Peninsular Malaysia revealed that 18% adolescents aged 13 to 17.9 years suffered from anaemia by the criteria of Hb < 11g/dl (Tee *et al.*, 1998). The prevalence rate of anaemia varied in the different rural communities with the lowest reported for the rubber smallholding community (6%) and highest in the fishing community (45%).

Anaemia in Sabah

There are relatively fewer studies on the nutritional status of the diverse population groups in Sabah. Studies in the early 1980s showed a high prevalence of anaemia ranging from 18% to 67% as determined by hemoglobin level among children (Chen *et al.*, 1981; Kandiah *et al.*, 1984). The former study reported prevalence of anaemia in over 3,000 children aged 0.5 to 13 years of various ethnic groups namely, Kadazans, Chinese, Bajaus, Malays and Muruts in the Interior, West Coast and Kudat Divisions of Sabah (**Table 1**). The mean prevalence of anaemia among the children was 26% ranging from 16 to 31% in the various age groups. This study also found that children aged below 2 years had the highest prevalence of anaemia (31%). However, there was no significant difference in the prevalence of anaemia according to gender (Chen *et al.*, 1981). Another study found 18 to 67% anaemia in children aged 0 to 6 years in three malaria endemic villages of Bengkoka Peninsula in Sabah (Kandiah *et al.*, 1984).

Problem Statement

Adolescence is characterised by a large growth spurt and maturation (Beard, 2000). Rapid growth during adolescence renders positive iron balance difficult to maintain (Yip, 1994). This is due to the expansion of blood volume that occurs concurrently with growth. It is also a period of increased overall iron requirement because of the adolescent spurt in body mass (Himes *et al.*, 1997), especially among female adolescents because of the onset of menstrual losses (Kim *et al.*, 1993). Iron

Table 1: Prevalence of anaemia amongst children of various ethnic groups in the Interior, West Coast and Kudat Division of Sabah

Age (years)	% Anaemic		Mean
	Male	Female	Combined
0.5- 2	34.5	27.4	30.9
2 – 4	14.8	26.4	20.2
4 – 6	32.4	19.1	25.0
6 – 8	28.1	31.7	29.8
8 – 10	29.6	27.4	28.5
10 – 12	22.8	23.3	23.0
12 – 13	17.6	13.5	15.8
0.5 – 13	26.4	25.6	26.0

(Source: Chen *et al.*, 1981)

Study population: 0 – 4 years = 28
5 – 12 years = 2877
Total = 3672

Criteria for anaemia: 6 months – 6 years: Hb < 11g/dl

status during adolescence may be complicated further by low dietary iron intake (Nelson *et al.*, 1993; Sanders *et al.*, 1994).

Iron deficiency anaemia is widespread among adolescents in developing countries, with prevalence of more than 40% anaemia reported in Asian countries (Kurz, 1996). Iron requirements in adolescence are higher in developing countries because of infectious diseases and parasitic infestations that may cause iron loss, and because of low bioavailability of iron from diets limited in heme iron (Kanani and Poojara, 2000).

In general, the aetiology of iron deficiency anaemia can be viewed as an imbalance between iron absorption and the body's needs as illustrated in **Figure 1**. Such an imbalance generally arises from low dietary iron intake, poor absorption